the escapist

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by Allen Varney

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It's my sorry duty to inform you that issue 13's Editor's Note summarizing the topic has been replaced by a Letter from the Publisher. Unlucky 13, I suppose. Not to worry - since we're a weekly publication it'll be only seven days until our Executive Editor returns.

Until then, I'm going to bore you by talking about advertising. Many of you wrote in to express feedback - or outrage - about our decision to place ads in issue 12. There's ads in this issue, too, and you should expect them to be an ongoing part of the magazine from here on out. It's a step that's been planned from issue 1, but it was an important one for us to make. I'm especially pleased that our offering of big, attractive print-style ads has been successful.

I did want to respond to those of you who took umbrage at our decision to place a beer ad in a game magazine. I made a brief post on this issue on the CTRL-V blog, but I'd like to expand my thinking there a bit further. Would the

Wall Street Journal be a better newspaper if it only hosted ads from investment banks? Should National Geographic only accept ads from travel companies? Nonsensical to imagine, yet all too often, game magazines only feature ads for games. It's what's expected, but I don't think it's a good trend. I feel strongly that one of the best ways for a magazine to ensure that the advertising-editorial border is not breached is by ensuring that it has a wide breadth and scope of advertisers outside its industry.

That's not say that you will never see a game advertisement in *The Escapist* - far from it; indeed, we've already run one. But you should also expect to see ads from Fortune 500 brands, technology companies, consumer and luxury goods, a whole range of companies. I think it's a good thing, and I hope you do, too.

Best regards,

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: I get enough adverts from traditional media without being told by an "independant" games mag what beer I should be drinking. Frankly, an advert has never convinced me to buy anything, and they do nothing except breed annoyance. Don't you have any respect for the magazine you set up, not to mention the authors of the articles which have been cut in half by your corporate whoring?

-Doug Inman

To the Editor: I of course was disappointed by the appearance of ads in your magazine but I understand that financial support has to come from somewhere. I'm sure there will be much wailing and gnashing of teeth over this change, but don't worry. As long as you exert a bit of editorial control over the ads to keep them within the aesthetic boundaries of the magazine, most of us aren't going anywhere. I don't mind ads when I know that they are enabling a company to bring me an excellent (and

free!) product. Please just don't let them get out of control, and never, ever let them use Flash.

-Jerrod Hansen

the escapist

To The Editor: I recently discovered your magazine after it was linked on www.hardocp.com . I have been an avid gamer pretty much my entire life, as my parents had a TI 99/4A computer before I was even born. However, I have always gone to great lengths to dissociate myself from the fanboys and zealots, and the idea of a magazine that appeals to the intellect, as opposed to consumer impulses, is fantastic: not only giving me something to read and look forward to, but as a sign that the industry is starting to mature. The creeping backlash against big-business gaming gives hope to a person who's newest console is a Dreamcast that they bought used for $20 and steadfastly stays a generation or two behind on PC hardware.

Anyways, many words have been spent on lauding your publication, and almost as many discussing your layout. I for one am in favor of it, however I think it is seriously lacking one small feature: page numbers. It would not only be very convenient but also contribute to your goal of replicating the feel of a printed magazine to have each page numbered, and to include a "Go To"

function so that your readers can skip around at will.

-Jason Begy

To the Editor: I know a lot of people will criticize you for including advertisements in your e-zine. I will agree that it is "annoying", but please take these complaints with a grain of salt. What the addition of advertisements really means is that you have crossed the threshold from the web-blog-with-nice-formatting stigma into the world of professional, magnificently entertaining literature. Well done!

-Andy

The Buzz Is Gone

***Race Into Space* went to the Moon and then to oblivion**

by Allen Varney

BUZZZZZZZ! Where are you, Buzz Aldrin? I'm playing your old 1993 Interplay game, *Buzz Aldrin's Race Into Space* (*BARIS*), about the 1960s U.S.-Soviet space race. Things are bad. I've got two Apollo 9 astronauts in a Jupiter rocket on a direct ascent to the Moon, in fall 1968. Looks like they're about to burn up on reentry. This will knock my capsule reliability down to 46% and also - speaking just on general principle - sucks. Why does your *Race Into Space* keep frying my astronauts, Buzz? Is this supposed to make me want to go into space? You've got me so jumpy I can't drive to the supermarket.

Now that I think on it, Buzz, I don't want help from you. Even though your name is on this game, you were an astronaut, not a NASA engineer. If *Buzz Aldrin's Race Into Space* were about piloting the Apollo 11 LEM to the lunar surface in July 1969, you and Neil Armstrong would be my go-to guys. But to help me win *BARIS*, I need someone who can plan a whole space program - some high-profile, fully-empowered Space Czar who is working even now to get America back to the Moon and beyond.

Oh, wait - there isn't one.

Does that help explain why we can't buy *Race Into Space* any more?

> We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard.

- John F. Kennedy, Sept. 12, 1962

No Space Available

Pop culture defines society's desires. A zillion *Wing Commander* and *X-Wing* knockoffs let you zoom around space and zap alien bad guys, but astonishingly few electronic games take a realistic, contemporary approach to space travel, let alone a historical treatise like *BARIS*. People just don't seem to want them.

You'd think a plausible approach to colonizing the Moon, the Solar system and other stars - the future of humanity - would make a good game. Think of the grandiose goals you could present: constructing orbital habitats, mining asteroids for metals and water, and terraforming Mars! Building a space elevator (http://www.worldchanging. com/archives/003429.html#more), which seems tantalizingly possible even today, would present a wonderful

challenge. Heck, you can easily spend a day or more just tooling around the Milky Way with Alessandro Ghignola's 1996 space simulator, *Noctis* (http:// anywherebb.com/noctis.html), and that's not even a game.

But the vacuum is near perfect. Hardly a dozen electronic games have covered space travel with anything like realism. In 1984, Lawrence Holland created a fine NASA mission simulator for Avantage, *Project: Space Station*, before moving on to Lucasarts and *X-Wing*. And in 1987, Electronic Arts published Karl Buiter's odd space business simulation *Earth Orbit Stations* for the Apple II.

We've also seen a few space shuttle simulators, notably the excellent Virgin Interactive *Shuttle* from 1992. Microsoft never produced a sequel to its 1994 *Space Simulator*, though in 2001 we got a superior freeware equivalent, Martin Schweiger's *Orbiter* (http://orbit. medphys.ucl.ac.uk/orbit.html). Another worthwhile indie effort is Kai Backman's 2003 space station simulator *ShortHike* (http://www.shorthike.com/). Legacy Interactive's 2001 *Moon Tycoon* is OK, but limited, god-game about building a lunar colony. Beyond that, we reach

conventional real-time strategy games like Humongous Entertainment's 2002 *MoonBase Commander* (mistakenly marketed as a children's game) and goofy sims, like FireFly Studios' 2003 *Space Colony*; realism recedes into the blackness.

Just as interesting are the tantalizing projects that never made it to liftoff. In the late '80s Origin Systems, run by Skylab astronaut Owen Garriott's, sons Richard and Robert, started an unannounced, untitled space colonization simulation. The company made decent headway on the project until somebody realized it made a lot more financial sense to do another *Wing Commander* game instead.

...somebody realized it made a lot more financial sense to do another Wing Commander game instead.

The highest-profile space-colony game that aborted before launch was undoubtedly *SimMars*, an ambitious title Maxis announced in 1998. Having presented a Mars terraforming scenario in *SimEarth*, Maxis would now use actual NASA research to portray a realistic, accurate effort to colonize Mars. From a 1999 IGN.com *SimMars* preview (http://pc.ign.com/articles/132/132191p1.html) by Vincent Lopez:

You select a section of the planet to colonize, then launch a lander from Earth filled with vehicles, or your first set of scientists and engineers. Unlike earlier Maxis sims, you control vehicles and characters in a full 3-D environment. [...] The design of the

vehicles and astronauts are still in the classic Maxis style, realistic but full of character and life, as well as the small details that continue to make the company's games so charming. It was important to [Maxis producer Matthew] Thornton that the astronauts add a true character-based feel to the colonization process, and the company used EA's capture studio in order to get correct animations for everything from repairing a faulty vehicle to golfing on the planet's surface. You'll never forget the first moments watching a team of astronauts exit a lander and begin work on the colony - and when one of the team loses their air hose, you'll definitely feel it. [...] Though the game begins in the near future, Thornton

says that the goal is to follow humanity into the first few hundred years of development, when research has allowed scientists to create concrete and steel structures on the planet, and combine colonies into "cities" in order to prepare for long-term habitation.

But in 2000 Maxis cancelled *SimMars*. Today the only Martian sim activity is an unrelated fan effort, a mod for *SimCity 4* creatively titled *SimMars* (http://www.simmars.simvision.net/). Why did Maxis pull the plug? Because somebody realized it made a lot more financial sense to do another Sims expansion instead.

Do you see a pattern here?

Top Ten Ways to Tick Off Buzz Aldrin
10. When you meet him, make buzzing sound like a bee.

9. Squeegee his space helmet and ask for a buck. [...]

5. Every time he eats cheese, wink and say, "Wonder where you got that, moon man?" [...]

2. Refer to Apollo Eleven as "That guy from the 'Rocky' movies."

1. Hog the Tang.

- David Letterman, The Late Show (September 12, 2002)

Why did Maxis pull the plug? Because somebody realized it made a lot more financial sense to do another Sims expansion instead.

If a mission fails and astronauts die, your reliability can drop calamitously while the program regroups.

And Cancel His Computer Game...

For historicity and strategic depth in realistic space games, *BARIS* remains the gold standard. *BARIS*, Interplay's 1993 computer game by Fritz Bronner and Michael McCarty, was adapted from *Liftoff!*, an obscure 1989 Task Force Games strategy board game designed by Bronner (with John Olsen and Robert L. Sassone).

In both board and computer versions, you can direct either the American or Soviet space program in a race to land astronauts on the Moon and return them safely to Earth. You manage a hardware budget, teams of scientists, and crews of astronauts/cosmonauts. You research various projects - capsules, rockets, boosters, kickers - to increase your missions' all-important reliability percentages. If a mission fails and astronauts die, your reliability can drop calamitously while the program regroups. You progress through a sequence of programs (Mercury/Vostok, Gemini/ Voskhod, Apollo/Soyuz), and decide the sequence of unmanned and manned missions that will maximize reliability. Throughout, random events, such as a command from the government to make your next mission manned no matter what, complicate matters

A director faces many interesting decisions: lander type (Eagle/Duet vs. Cricket/L-3); Lunar-Orbital Rendezvous (LOR) vs. Earth-Orbital Rendezvous (EOR); and exactly how to get to the Moon: two-, three-, or four-person capsule, reusable three-person shuttle, or the science-fictional Direct Ascent? When do you research what? What hardware do you need? How much will it cost? You face the same choices the United States and the USSR faced, and in making decisions you start to understand why history played out as it did.

There has never been another computer game like *BARIS*. It is innovative, balanced and highly replayable, but complex and extremely hard to win. It appeared first on floppy disk, and proved so difficult, the CD-ROM version the following year reduced the chances of mission failure.

There has never been another computer game like BARIS.

Nowadays, that's not the game's only tricky aspect. The *BARIS* copyright has reverted to the designers, who have made the game freely available. (Abandonware sites usually offer just the floppy version, but the CD-ROM version includes scarce archival video footage of actual launches, so get it if you can.) But *BARIS* is for MS-DOS only. The players who couldn't run the game back in 1993, because they lacked a CD-ROM drive, now can't run it from (so to speak) the other direction. Setting it up under a modern Windows installation requires a DOS emulator and lots of finicky attention.

Yet fans still cherish *BARIS*. Leon Badarat maintains a fan site (http://www.geocities.com/raceintospace/) with all kinds of emulator tips, background, and useful material. It's a Geocities site, so if you get bandwidth limit errors, be patient. The website, The Space Race (http://www.thespacerace.com/), has an active forum discussion (http://www.thespacerace.com/forum/index.php?topic=64.0) of *BARIS*. There's also a

Sourceforge project (http://raceintospace.sourceforge.net) to recreate the game for modern platforms, but it appears to have stalled.

Could there ever be a commercial remake or spiritual sequel? In today's market, the idea is increasingly unlikely. A small group of players passionately loves the game, but a mass audience would be only mildly interested - not unlike the way America's diehard community of space enthusiasts cannot overcome general public apathy toward the space program. NASA wants to

spend 100 billion dollars and 12 years to return astronauts to the moon, but the political will for this remains unclear. Some people do get excited about private companies striving to reach low-Earth orbit, such as Armadillo Aerospace, co-founded by *DOOM* and *Quake* programmer John Carmack. But without a compelling vision and a worthy opponent, most people appear unwilling to imagine reaching for the stars, either in a game or in reality.

Buzz Aldrin's Race Into Space, like the space race itself, proved a magnificent dead end.

Allen Varney is a freelance writer and game designer based in Austin, Texas. His published work includes six books, three board games, and nearly two dozen role-playing game supplements.

Pigtails, Pioneers and Polygons

Bringing Real American Girls to a Virtual World

by Kris Naudus

A little brunette girl walks down the street, clutching a blonde-haired doll with a toothy grin. The doll is a foot-and-a-half tall, and wears a pioneer dress reminiscent of Melissa Gilbert in *Little House on the Prairie*. The little girl and her parents turn a corner, and now you see another girl, this time red-haired, holding a doll with a similar expression, except that this doll has a darker complexion, and wears the buckskin clothing of the Nez Perce tribe. Further down the street are two sisters, one eight and the other looking about six. Each carries a doll - the elder holding a brunette dressed in Victorian garb, the younger child has a redhead in Colonial wear.

It may seem weird to be out in the world and see little girls all carrying essentially the same doll - but in outfits that were trendy long before you were born. Yet this scene is becoming more and more common among the playgrounds, birthday parties and family outings of America. These are American Girl dolls, and more than 11 million have been sold since the company starting selling them in 1986.

The American Girl "experience" has expanded to include not just the dolls and books, but also a magazine, a stage show, two high-class retail outlets in Chicago and New York, and a movie on the WB (with another to follow this November).

American Girl was founded in 1985, when Pleasant T. Rowland saw a gap in the market, a lack of dolls that were neither the buxom adult beauties of Barbie nor the round dumpling baby dolls that have been a mainstay of girls' playtime for centuries. Three characters were created, little girls from varying points in America's history (the series eventually expanded to eight main characters from different eras). Each girl was introduced and fleshed out in a series of books, each book telling a particularly themed story - a school story, a birthday tale, a holiday story.

They were meant to be educational, with unique stories little girls could explore through play. But what made this interactivity possible, what made the experience really different, were the dolls. Each girl was made into a doll (purchased separately or bundled with the introductory book), and every subsequent book was accompanied by

the release of a collection of outfits and accessories straight from its pages. The accessories were more than just fashion accoutrements - they included vintage-style lunch boxes, pets, furniture, even miniature dolls for the dolls. Each set was meant to make history interactive.

In 1998, American Girl was purchased by Mattel, the company who so famously brought us the Barbie doll back in 1959. In a time when Barbie sales have taken a hit from the multi-ethnic, urban-themed Bratz line, the American Girl series has proven to be a consistent best-seller. The American Girl "experience" has expanded to include not just the dolls and books, but also a magazine, a stage show, two high-class retail outlets in Chicago and New York, and a movie on the WB (with another to follow this November). Despite all these attempts to make American Girl even more interactive, not much has been done to take the franchise into the electronic arena.

In the 90s, The Learning Company **did** release software based on the American Girls franchise: *The American Girls Premiere*. Players were given the opportunity to create and watch their

own theatrical play based on the American Girl stories, selecting a script and casting characters to perform. They could even write their own play, and the level of control was such that players could adjust the lighting and sound. It garnered mostly positive reviews, though not necessarily for its educational value.

The problem is while the software certainly encouraged creativity, users had more fun inputting their own ideas, eschewing the rich historical universe of American Girl. The characters and their stories were just window dressing, not integral to the experience. For any piece of software to really make use of the American Girl license, it needs to play to one of the major strengths of the brand - the detailed historical universe and the engaging adventures that take place in it.

Imagine a fully immersive environment where the player gets to explore the house of one of the girls, like the pioneer girl, Kirsten. Players could walk around inside her humble farmhouse, check out the barn, explore the closets and trunks and all the clothing they may contain, pick up different items, and operate various household devices like looms or water pumps. Each book in the American

Girl series has an appendix in the back which describes the historical context, divulging some factual information on what life was like for the people of that time and what their everyday lives might have been like. A video game could integrate this function into the gameplay. A player could highlight an object and get information about it, information that would be vital to using the item in-game.

A large part of what made *Myst* popular with casual and non-gamers was its pacing. They could explore the environments; walk around without the need to be somewhere right away. It wasn't frantic - it was relaxing, inviting.

Each American Girl game would be similar to that. For each girl, there would be a story to follow, certain objectives to be achieved, but no urgent clock to push the player forward. Gameplay would be similar to an old adventure game like the ones LucasArts and Sierra used to produce, with the environmental detail inherent in *Shenmue*. The story would be akin to those presented in the books, perhaps even written by the same authors for a sense of consistency. There might even be multiple stories in the same game - but regardless of the

number of stories, none of them should ever take longer than a handful of hours to complete. Since it's inside the environment of a 10-year-old girl, none of the games would be too expansive, too intimidating. It would be an intimate experience that even a non-gamer could approach with confidence and become comfortable with.

With a ready-made concept - and their gaming pedigree - it is certainly surprising that Mattel has not taken their successful acquisition and expanded it into the video game medium with a true interactive experience. It seems like a missed opportunity - American Girl is about celebrating femininity. Turning it into a video game would allow girls to experience a medium normally dominated by boys, but not sacrifice any of their girlish characteristics or ideals.

But that is exactly the problem - the thing that makes the brand a perfect choice for a video game is also the perfect argument against it. American Girl is about celebrating ideals, old-fashioned concepts of what it means to be a child, specifically a little girl. Each doll will set back a family about $100 - and that's not counting the myriad of

accessories. Yet many parents gladly spend this money, as the dolls represent a childhood their little girls are still interested in. People often remark that kids grow up too quickly these days, and part of that is because many kids would rather have personal electronics than a simple teddy bear or a toy car. Electronics and designer clothing are already pretty high priced items. So it's not much of a leap to spend the money on a doll instead, and people will jump on the opportunity precisely because it's not an iPod, a cell phone or a video game. It's something they can identify with, something they understand.

Some may say making an American Girl video game goes in a different direction than Ms. Rowland was trying to achieve when she created the brand (educational software is held to a different societal standard). This however, does not make the concept of a video game a bad one, or an impossible idea. A lot will depend on what the American Girl Company and Mattel decide the future of the franchise should be. Is it just a way to educate children about history? A tool for empowering little girls? Or is it a way to prolong the ideal of childhood for just a few more years? Given how ideals

change, and how our own industry is catering more and more toward the young adult male gamer, perhaps it would be in their best interest to embrace the video game medium while there's still a place for younger children in the industry - as well as in our best interest, to capture a larger female audience before they leave both their childhood and gaming behind them, heading into adult mainstream pastures.

Kris Naudus has written articles for Anime Insider and Anime News Network, and currently provides editorial at The-Brand-Management-Firm-That-Must-Not-Be-Named. She also keeps a video game blog which can be named over at 1Up.com.

THE CONTRARIAN: Feature Creep

by John Tynes

When *Shrek 2* hit theatres, there were no banners trumpeting "Now with more polygons!" or "Three extra jokes per minute!" Yet those are the kinds of back-of-the-box bullet points game publishers slap on sequels to excite us. And you know what? It's a stupid, stupid idea.

The sports games were among the first. When you have to sell *Madden* yet again, the marketing department goes pale at the thought of ad campaigns trumpeting nothing but "This year's stats!" or "Those annoying bugs from last year have been fixed!" Instead we get upgradeable mansions, manager mode, hot-dog concession price simulation, stadium design, licensed music and EA's ridiculous Game Face. Marketers' sweaty animal fear drives this style of development, and as more games get more sequels more often, we're seeing this crap everywhere: *Prince of Persia*, *Splinter Cell*, *Warcraft*, you name it.

It's called **feature creep**. Way back in the 1980s, there were more word processors on the market than *Microsoft Word*, and back then it was still possible to come up with a new feature that would quickly become essential. Once upon a time, younglings, there was no such thing as spell checking or smart quotes. Magazine ads trumpeted the dreaded feature-comparison checklists in which *Word* and *WordPerfect* would be stacked side-by-side, check marks pointing out the glaring deficiencies in the competitor's products. "Better" became synonymous with "more." If you've ever wondered why you spend half an hour turning off features after installing *Word* on a new computer, feature creep is the reason.

Over the long term, feature creep is the doom of gaming. Can you imagine someone new to this medium picking up the 12th iteration of *Splinter Cell* with the thought, "Hey, I'll try that online multiplayer mode I heard about." Jesus God. When *Pandora Tomorrow* introduced its asymmetrical multiplayer, it was a terrific idea with a lot of promise. By the time *Chaos Theory* hit shelves, that same game mode was ratcheted up with so many new features

that only the hyperattenuated fans still playing *Pandora*'s version a year later could possibly enjoy it - because that was the market the developers listened to, the fools. The learning curve went from steep to moebius. Ten years from now, the entirety of *Splinter Cell* will probably be played in Sanskrit.

Games today are built by and for gamers who have at least a decade of play behind them, with all those hard-earned assumptions and skills. I'm not talking about people who live for *Counterstrike*. I just mean basic literacy issues, like knowing that shooting crates is good but shooting barrels is bad, or that weapons in first-person shooters usually have an alternate fire mode. Long-time gamers take that stuff for granted, and obsessive 12-year-olds with lots of free time catch up quickly. But if you aren't a veteran gamer or a kid, there's no front door to this medium. (Except Nintendo, whose new Revolution controller is a guaranteed system seller - for the Playstation 3.)

Recently, I picked up *Namco Museum* for the Xbox. It's terrific. My girlfriend was a major *Mario* fan on the NES when she was a teenager, and sure enough, she

Ten years from now, the entirety of Splinter Cell will probably be played in Sanskrit.

blew three hours one night playing *Pac-Man*, *Galaga*, *Rolling Thunder*, and so on. She had a blast. And I had a natural thought: I should pull out another game from my library that she might enjoy, something current. She hasn't played a 3D game before, and that's a skill that takes some getting used to. *Star Wars: Republic Commando*? *Fatal Frame 2*? *Halo 2*? No, no, and no. None of those games are suitable for new gamers - and indeed, not much is.

Gamers and game reviewers alike demand new features. If a sequel offers nothing but more of the same, it's considered a failure, even if that same thing was absolutely fantastic a year ago. So we get sequels of increasing complexity and scope, ensuring that only existing gamers will ever enjoy them.

Feature creep can also screw games up. Look at *Halo 2*: Bungie normal-mapped the hell out of the graphics, and in exchange we got glitchy-looking cutscenes and no ending. Could the story of Master Chief and the Arbiter been resolved if Bungie hadn't felt the pressure to ramp up the graphic technology so much? I'm going to go out

on a limb here and say yes, the new graphics features cost us a real ending.

Then there's *Knights of the Old Republic 2*. It's a terrific game - assuming you're a hardcore gamer - and it's the first game I've played where I thought the voice acting was genuinely interesting and worthy of critical appraisal. All we really needed was a good story and good characters, more of the same stuff we enjoyed in the first game. What'd we get? The ability to break down and recreate almost every item in the game, allowing us to min-max every piece of gear, for every character, at every level. I did it. I'm not proud. Give me an obsessive, tweaky feature and I'll fall for it like Popeye for spinach. But we also got a butchered ending, incomplete character arcs and an entire subplot about a planet of droids that abruptly cuts off partway through. Fans of the PC version even located the completed script and voiceover files from all the content the developers had to cut, still there but stillborn. Could we have had a complete story if we didn't have that entire item-creation system? Maybe. Start cutting new features and, God forbid, there might be more time for new content.

Imagine the world we could be living in. What if, for $5 a month, you'd get a new *Splinter Cell* level to download? No new features, no new gadgets, no graphics upgrades. Just another level, another hour of fun with Sam Fisher. I'd buy that. Wouldn't you? There are plenty of games I could keep enjoying for a long time with new levels and no new features. But parade that kind of approach past the marketing staff and they'll hiss at you. Instead we get new weapons, new gadgets, new game modes, more complexity and less accessibility.

I'm not just going to whine about the problem of feature creep. Let me offer a solution. Don't just make sequels. Make **prequels**. Prequels in the sense of stripped-down feature sets and easy-entry gameplay at budget pricing. Call it *Splinter Cell: Training Ground*. You can sneak, shoot and grab. No gadgets. No funky bullets. Sneak-or-shoot multiplayer. Twenty bucks. After six months, you give it away free in magazines, pack it in the console box or do an AOL-style mass mailing a month before the next sequel ships. Imagine an Xbox 360 that shipped with ten prequels like this on the hard drive, everything a new gamer would need to get up to

speed with the state of the art in racing, shooters, fighting, football, stealth, squad tactics, you name it. Simple, fun, accessible. Every year you refresh the prequels with new levels and **no new features**.

Then, when the budget prequels start outselling the hardcore sequels, you can tell marketing to shove it. And my girlfriend will finally have something to play that isn't 20 years old.

What a wonderful world it could be...

John Tynes has been a game designer and writer for fifteen years, and is a columnist for The Stranger, X360 UK, and The Escapist. His most recent book is Wiser Children, a collection of his film criticism.

Someday, I'll Hack the Gibson

by Joe Blancato

It's your first job of the day. A mid-sized corporation lost a million bucks to a cyber thief, and their bank isn't providing any information on where the money went. They're willing to offer you a 10% commission to track down their money, and an additional 5% if you're able to identify the person responsible. You begin to list your "hops," familiar terminals you ritually log into before a big hack, designed to slow down automated trace programs, so if the unthinkable happens and you screw up, the authorities won't be banging on your door.

You break your way into the bank's security using a mix of brute force crackers, decrypters and an engineered version of the system administrator's voice. As you poke through the access logs, looking for records of transactions that add up to one million, you notice something in the way the paper trail unfolds: You've seen this hacking style before. A few quick steps around the network and you're sure of it; you've worked with this hacker in the past.

A trace-detection program **chirps** to alert you; the bank's system is now trying to figure out exactly who you are. You fire up your IM program and toss a message to your buddy, Spectre.

"Hey man, did you hit up a corporation for a million bucks earlier this week?" you ask, cautiously mindful that the tracing program is getting caught up on a network where you're logged in as the administrator.

"Maybe," Spectre replies. "Why?" **Chirp**.

"Oh, no reason. It's just that I, well, you know, logged into First Bank on behalf of a Large Corporation, and your fingerprints are all over their money."

"You can't prove anything." Defiant, cocky. **Chirp**.

You beam over the access logs you've uncovered.

"I have you by the balls, Spectre. Give me 60%, and maybe I'll tell my contact I couldn't find any information. 'The hacker was just too smart to leave a trail.'" **Chirp**, **chirp**.

A long pause, then: "What's your account number?"

Uplink really was an amazing game. A cyberpunk thriller created by British developer Introversion, the game dropped you into a fictional hacking circuit responsible for much of the cyber crime, and cyber crime detection, in the world. As a player, you climbed through set ranks of skill, unlocking missions with higher payouts and higher risk. Eventually, you come into contact with a computer version of a pandemic plague, and you have to decide to destroy it or

sell it to a high bidder. The interface is clean, functional and just **feels** how hacking should feel, giving nods to movies like *Hackers* and the old *Shadowrun* Genesis game. You dip and dive through a "virtual virtual world," covering your tracks as you rob banks and destroy other hackers' reputations and lives. But there was something missing. The hackers you sent to prison weren't real. You were alone in an infinite universe.

Hacking is largely a solo sport, but very few net runners have existed exclusively in a bubble. When you're traipsing over the internet with bravado, much of the incentive to hack - beyond the normal "we only want information" mantra - is being able to brag to other hackers that you've been somewhere, climbed the Everest of hacks, established a new high watermark for script kiddies across the globe. Groups will collaborate to bring down massive networks (a few years ago, Yahoo was brought down by a group who managed to use thousands of computers to run "denial of service" attacks on their servers), but *Uplink* focused on one-hacker runs because it was a single player game.

Imagine a massive version of *Uplink*. Hundreds or thousands of hackers moving around a virtual cyberspace, working with and against each other to steal money from banks, engineer viruses and anti-virus programs, or create an organized crime syndicate. Everyone works together to remain just a few steps ahead of the law enforcement capable of killing your online persona with a search warrant. Players could communicate via a souped-up version of IRC and instant messaging programs while they worked. "Younger" hackers could organize diversions while their mentors run through a large network. Currency moves around at light speed, but all that really matters is your credibility.

But that's not what would make a massive version of *Uplink* so engaging. *Uplink*'s **nuance** was in the details. There were "shadows" of other hackers everywhere. You had to chase fictional enemies around the internet, follow logs or locate a guy's house. With hundreds of people online, that latticework just explodes with activity. You're chasing someone who's chasing your buddy who's chasing someone who's chasing you. On top of that, your epic Hack of

You dip and dive through a "virtual virtual world," covering your tracks as you rob banks and destroy other hackers' reputations and lives.

Introversion are the type of guys with the vision to pull it off, too. Now, they just need the investors…

Hacks could be completely ruined by some newbie dinking around in a network three hops behind you. One log file edited incorrectly by a guy you've never met may result in your untimely incarceration.

And that's where an online *Uplink* could pave all kinds of new ground. Players, through direct competition, could shape the world in any number of ways, while the world remains completely cogent. It has the potential to be the holy grail of game design: Players will have the keys to the car, but they won't be able to crash it into a tree five miles out of the garage, because the mayhem still occurs on the rails of the game's design.

Introversion are the type of guys with the vision to pull it off, too. Now, they just need the investors, which have to this point eluded them. And that's why *Uplink* was single player. It was a garage band effort that managed to be the best

game of 2001, and even their second release, *Darwinia* (which has yet to secure a publisher), pushes more envelopes than you can count. But until investors feel comfortable enough to take risks again, chasing holy grails is going to have to take a back seat to cost-benefit analyses and cold, hard cash.

Uplink is a platinum mine while everyone is still panning for gold. It's only a matter of time before someone realizes what Introversion is sitting on, and that's when you and I can team up to hack the Gibson - as long as you give me my 60%. 🖼

Joe Blancato is a Contributing Editor for The Escapist Magazine, in addition to being the Founder of waterthread.org.

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NEWS BITS

Best Buy to Sell Used Games

Best Buy is considering going into the used games market in an attempt to cash in on the massive amount of profit Electronics Boutique reported last quarter.

As games become more expensive, more consumers are sure to look to used games as a purchasing alternative. While it can be argued this is bad for the industry - used game revenue doesn't get back to the publisher - the staggering profit EB has boasted only guarantees more retail outfits will be considering the practice.

HD-DVD Pushed Back, but Still Ahead of Blu-Ray

Toshiba is holding off until February of 2006 at the earliest to release its HD-DVD technology to consumers. But it's still speculated they'll come in ahead of Blu-Ray, which means the Xbox 360 may offer high definition solutions to consumers before the Playstation 3 has shipped.

Sega Inches toward 360 Dog Pile

Sega's Yuji Naka revealed his appreciation for the Xbox 360's development scheme in an interview with GameSpy. He compared Microsoft's networking vision to Sega's when they were developing the Dreamcast. He had less complimentary opinions about the PS3, mentioning its lofty system specifications surpass what even the most advanced TVs on the market are capable of displaying.

Although it's still early to call which side of the camp developers seem to be choosing, numerous developers have expressed admiration for the 360's development tools as of late. Naka's comments put him in company with outspoken *Gears of War* developer Cliffy B.

Casual Friday

CHECK BACK EVERY WEEKEND FOR ADDITIONAL CONTENT!

available NOW!

Capitalism is teh suxxOr!!111!
A Gamer's Diary
by Mark Wallace

July 3

My beta invite has finally arrived! I get the email while I'm at work, but of course I can't download the client there, not with my boss and the compliance department sniffing down my neck 24/7. Okay, so a couple of my trades in the oil market didn't go quite as planned last week - even though I had it on **very** good authority that Exxon/Mobil was about to announce a big find. Still, that's no reason to "remind" me about insider-trading statutes. Anyway, that's hardly a concern today. All I can think about is getting home and firing up my beta account on *Chief Economist*. I still can't decide what class I'll pick. Free-Market Capitalist? Banana-Republic Socialist? Ideological Communist? (According to the forum traffic, Developing Nation isn't very fleshed out yet, so I'll probably pass on that one. Although, the prospect of aid from the Virtual World Bank is tempting.) Maybe I'll go for the custom character creation and let my currency float while I carefully tweak my trade barriers. So many possibilities.

July 21

Well, I rolled a country on the Volcker server (how do they come up with these names, anyway?), but it hasn't done very well so far. I went with Benign Socialism, figuring a little free health care wouldn't hurt my citizens' productivity, but so far all I've had are problems with my labor markets. There aren't too many people on our server at the moment, so I've already been able to form a Common Market with a couple of my neighbors. But my consumers still don't want to buy foreign goods, and my producers are threatening a slowdown unless I institute tariffs. I think there must be some balancing issues the devs have yet to work out. But that's beta. As "first-person technocrat" games go, though, I'm not sure if *Chief Economist* is going to be much of a success. I've been playing these things ever since *Emerging Markets Meltdown*: *Brady Bond Buyback*, and that was more than ten years ago. I've definitely seen better. The typical FPT wouldn't make me worry about civil rights and gender equality. Ah well, the price of realism.

August 15

I think I'm getting the hang of this now. The second round of beta invites has gone out and the noobs have started to flock to Volcker. Socialism has its advantages. A Free-Market Capitalist on his first day in the game tried to flood my airwaves with cultural exports, but my people were having none of it. They clamored for a domestic production requirement on movies and TV shows and I gave it to them. Now even the capitalists can't get enough of whatever tripe it is my people are producing. (I wish the UI let you zoom in far enough to check out some actual products, but I guess there's a limit to the technology.) Well, as long as they're happy little worker bees, I don't much care.

My new problem, though, is inflation. I'm keeping the money supply in line with population growth, but the little CPI (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumer_price_index) readout just keeps on climbing. Maybe it's all the foreign investment I'm attracting.

Should I limit foreign ownership to 40 percent? Implement controls on repatriation of profits? I requested an Economic Assessment from the Virtual World Bank, but I haven't heard anything yet. They're probably too busy dealing with the poor sods who rolled Developing

Now even the capitalists can't get enough of whatever tripe it is my people are producing.
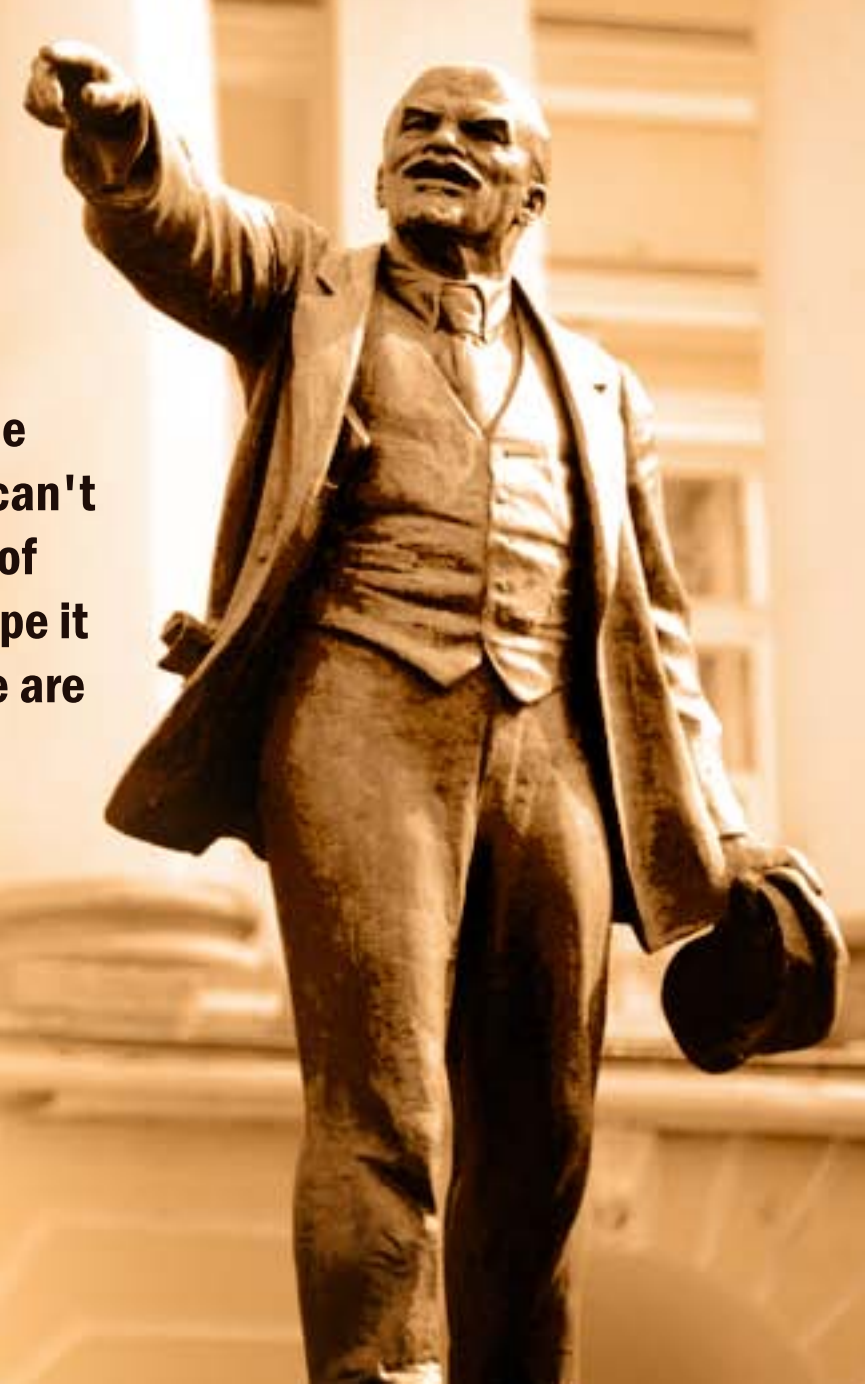
Nation characters. Good thing, too; I don't want their cheap labor putting my people out of jobs.

September 19

"Known issue," my ass! I finally got sick of the DevNat guy on my western border pirating the DVDs that have become my nation's biggest export. I didn't know what to do about it at first, but then I found a clause in the International Covenants (I hate having to click "agree" on that thing each time I log on) that lets a player seek economic control of another country for humanitarian reasons. And sure enough, this guy's population was starving. Invasion on! My army wasn't much, but it was more than he could muster. But when I sent in the troops, they just camped out in enemy territory and refused to fight. Some of them even defected! This has to be a bug. I petitioned the League of Virtual Nations, and was given the typical answer: "The behavior you describe is a known issue. An independent investigator has been appointed to look into possible diplomatic solutions." This had better get fixed by the time the game goes live or I am outta here. I didn't realize it when I signed up, but I

am itching for the Economy vs. Economy (EvE) aspect of this game.

October 1

Chief Economist goes live! I'm sticking with the game even though the invasion issue apparently hasn't been worked out yet, and even though my country was wiped at the end of beta. I didn't like where things were headed anyway. I moved over to the Thatcher server and rolled a Market Capitalist country called Profitania. Looks like I'll have some stiff competition over here. I nabbed some oil-rich desert sands near a coast with a good commercial trading route, and I've already got tariff deals worked out with my neighbors.

The new client rocks! You can zoom in on an oil field and actually adjust the length of workers' shifts (roughnecks work long days), or you can sit back and monitor charts from your office. Speaking of offices, the firm has been tense lately. There's some kind of investigation going on. All the analysts now have to disclose their positions whenever they so much as open their mouths in public. That doesn't apply to me, of course, since I'm a trader. Still, things are kind of creepy around there. Fortunately, there's *Chief*

Economist waiting for me when I get home.

October 5

I hate trolls. I've been watching the *Chief Economist* forums for any news of the invasion patch that's supposed to come out in Q4, and there's this one guy, N4dr, who just chaps my ass, always going on about income gaps and purchasing power parity. He doesn't see why GDP should be the measure of success. He wants Adam Smith Games to implement a Life, Liberty and Pursuit of Happiness index. I couldn't resist: I logged on as an alt and flamed him, explaining that it was money that makes the virtual world go round, pal, and if he didn't like it he could take his subscription fee and go home. Guess what his response was: "Capitalism is teh suxx0r!!111!" What a noob stick.

November 10

Okay, I know no game is immune to real-money trade, but this is ridiculous. One of the countries that borders me, Banania, is a Command Economy - his people do what he wants, but he has to deal with all kinds of other problems like importing food and a high death rate and all that. Anyway, he's been buying my oil, which has been great, but now I find out he's been using it to produce small arms and selling them to one of the Plutocrats on the next continent. Then he takes his profits and sells them on eBay. I raised my oil prices but now he's stopped buying (we don't have OPEC on the Thatcher shard yet), so now I've had to start printing money just to keep my refineries going. And guess WTF happened? Inflation! I proposed a deal where I buy his small arms. He's thinking about it. Still haven't heard back

on my petition about the invasion issue. I've gotta diversify.

December 25

It's been great to have a week off work, and I can't afford to fly out to see my family in California this year, so I've been spending all my time in *Chief Economist* and loving it. My initial assessment of the game seems to have been overly pessimistic. I hear the invasion patch is coming soon, that troll N4dr seems to be gone from the forums and I've got a deal going with the Command Economy on my northern border where he buys my oil, I buy his guns and the Plutocrats have had to start taking out high-interest loans because their citizens don't know how to do anything but manage numbered bank accounts. Plus, Adam Smith Games just banned a Communist country after they sought

Virtual World Bank loans and then didn't implement the bank's "advice." A Communist country, banned on Christmas Day - I love this game!

January 1

Start of a new fiscal year and finally, the long-promised invasion patch. With my stash of small arms, I know who my first target's going to be: Mr. Command Economy himself. His people have suffered too long. The patch notes describe a new Loyalty metric: "The capacity of a people to believe anything their *Chief Economist* tells them. Higher Loyalty indicates a population will obey directives if they can be shown to be in the people's economic interest." Perfect.

My Economic Dependence standings in relation to Mr. CE are off the charts. I've already tried dragging the Economic

Dependence figure into the Reason for Invasion box in the new dialogue and it looks like it'll work. Economic colonialism, here we come!

January 22

I did it! Two weeks ago, the invasion of Banania [Command Economy] by Profitania [Market Capitalism] (that's me) was launched. Three days later, Banania's finance minister resigned, and the country on my northern border is now known as Banania [Emerging Capitalism]. Just what I wanted; all the Emerging classes are highly subject to the influence of neighboring economies, that's why no one ever picks them to start out with. Now I'm forcing my oil down his throat, buying his small arms at rock-bottom prices and selling them on to the Plutocrats for major profits. A lot more people are buying my bonds now. I've got to find some way to sterilize those capital flows since I'm already seeing inflation again, but that shouldn't be too much of a problem. Anyway, I did it - I prevailed in EvE!
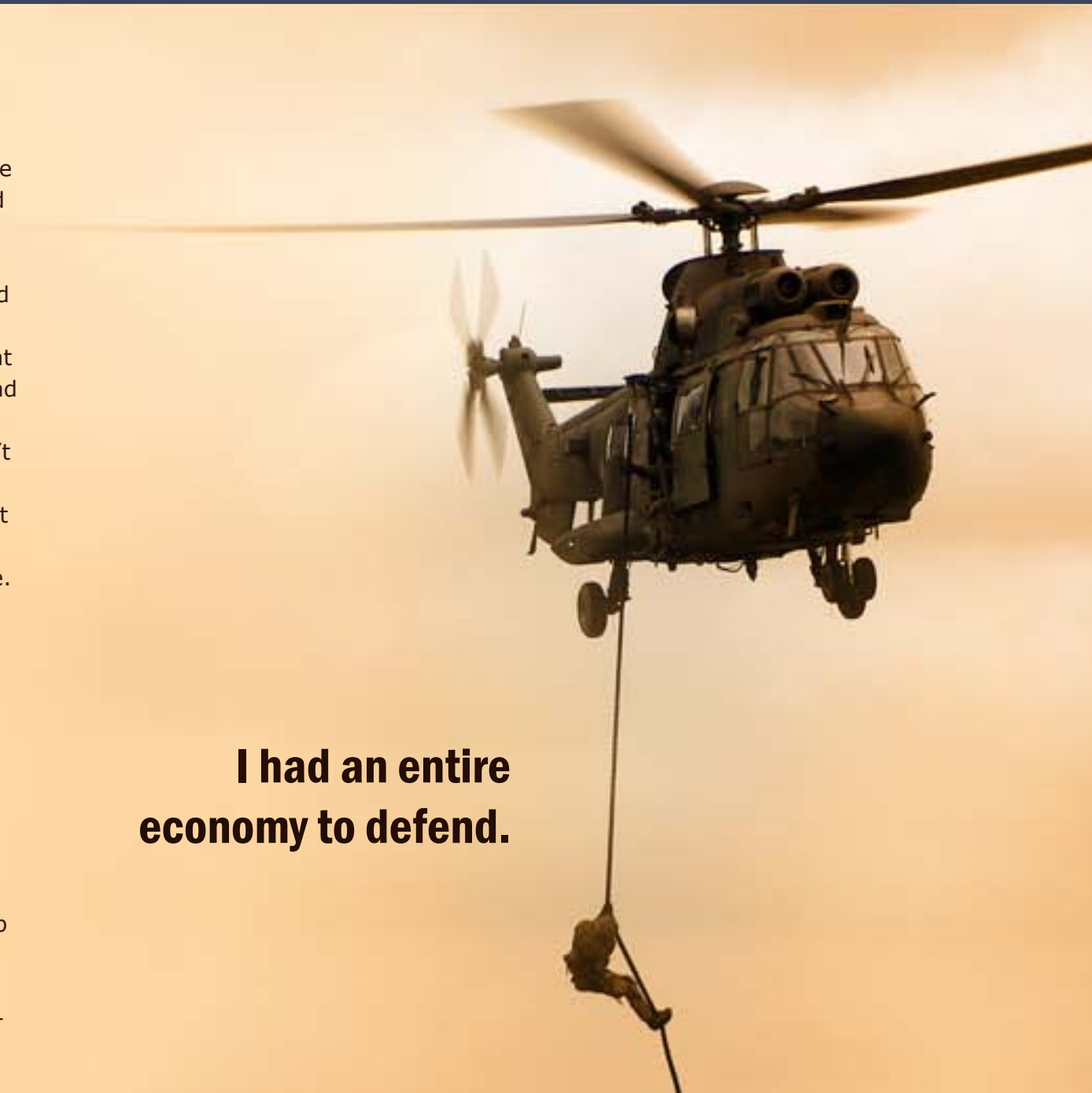
March 16

My boss called me into her office at work today. The first thing she asked me was whether I thought I was really cut out to be an oil trader. Of course I am, I told her. (Never show weakness.) She just came right out and said I was going to have to stop relying on inside information. I was shocked. I don't have any inside information. It wasn't like I'd hacked the client. I brought down Banania on my own merits. I'm just a better *Chief Economist* than most, I told her. I'd solved the problem of real-money trades. Of course, it seemed that some of the small arms I was selling had somehow found their way to another nation-state on my borders, but it didn't look like anything I couldn't handle. My boss didn't say anything for a while, but when she spoke, I realized my boastful nature had worked in my favor for once. She told me that while I could still expect a paycheck every two weeks, I shouldn't bother coming into the office for the time being. Woot! She knew I had better things to do than trade oil. I had an entire economy to defend.

April 2

The invasion has begun. And to my shock, I'm being invaded by N4dr, the forum troll himself, who's set himself up in a Socialist Republic just over my eastern border. How did I miss that? I must've been pre-occupied in Banania -

I had an entire economy to defend.

which is now a new problem, since the market forces I set up there have steered the population away from small arms production. Lulled into a false sense of security by the recent high oil prices that have made my own country rich, they've literally gone from making guns to making butter overnight. So I have plenty of money, but nothing to spend it on but dairy products. N4dr says he'll hold off on the invasion if I cut back oil production and put environmental controls into place, but there's no way. I have one of the cheapest costs of production on the virtual planet. If he wants to break my bank, he'll have to find a better way to do it.

April 26
Welcome to Profitania [Emerging Socialism]. Now go home. The invasion was over pretty quickly, with N4dr turning my own small arms against my poor defenseless citizens. All they were doing was trying to make a buck. Now they've got stars in their eyes for N4dr's minimum wage laws and environmental protocols. We've already had to embargo one of our biggest trading partners because their factories were belching too much smog. I've been trying to steer things back toward Emerging Capitalism, but every time I introduce some luxury goods or a new regressive tax, N4dr puts on a big show of giving his people an extra day of vacation or free education. I think I see an opening, though.

One of the forum mods plays an Isolationist nation here on the Thatcher server and I've been communicating with him lately via the Diplomatic Pouch. Maybe he can help me.

May 10
Finally became a Capitalist country again, so I just have to hold the line against N4dr until I can graduate from Emerging to Free-Market like I used to be. Although I might put some price controls into effect, which could delay that. The clean oil production Profitania has in place since the invasion isn't exactly raking in the green, but we have a new product now: wheat. Through an extensive irrigation and land reclamation program (N4dr actually helped with this), we've been able to turn our economy around and diversify. I just launched a new Five-Year Plan last week (five years in game-time, that is, a little more than a month in real time), and its first fiscal quarter looks good. It better be, because I'm gonna need the money. I resigned from my job at the beginning of the month. Well, I was asked to resign, but as far as I could tell, all the legal papers they were asking me to sign were just holding me back anyway. So now I'm free to run my economy any way I want. EBay, here I come. *E*

Mark Wallace is a journalist and editor residing in Brooklyn, New York, and at Walkering.com. He has written on gaming and other subjects for The New York Times, The New Yorker, Details and many other publications.

Alpha Centauri, The Final Frontier

by Greg Tito

There are those games that ruin your life, but you love them for doing it.

It was a beautiful September. I was awarded a writing residency in Montauk, NY for the entire month. There were no work obligations, no complaining wife. There were no distractions, nothing to disturb me from writing my masterpiece, a post-apocalyptic play set in NYC. I was grateful for the opportunity, but also nervous that given all that freedom, I wouldn't write a goddamned thing.

Enter *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* (*SMAC*), the nerdy cousin of the *Civilization* (*Civ*) family of titles. It was the only game I let myself take with me to Montauk, ostensibly because its science fiction setting could be lumped in with watching Mad Max films as "research." In truth, I couldn't imagine living a month without games, but I should have brought Pong. *Alpha Centauri* was just too good of a game.

One of the victory conditions in every *Civilization* title is to send a colonizing space expedition to our closest star system, *Alpha Centauri*. I always wanted to know what happened when they got there, and apparently Brian Reynolds did, too. He took the lead design job on *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri*. Reynolds's name is under Meier's on the splash screen but, hey, Sid is a legend. *Alpha Centauri* is built on the principles of *Civilization*, but elements are slightly tweaked or have different names. The player still founds cities, but they are now called bases. City improvements are facilities; Great Wonders are Secret Projects. You still want to discover as much territory as you can, research technology and conquer your neighbors.

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But this is not *Civilization*. In territory normally relegated to RPGs, *Alpha Centauri* tells the player a story as compelling as any sci-fi movie. The spaceship - ironically called the Unity - carrying the expedition is damaged and its captain is murdered by an unknown assailant. The crew, instead of uniting, splits into seven factions and they each make their way to the planet's surface in seven remaining escape pods.

The player assumes the role of one of these factions on the new planet (imaginatively called Planet), each led by an intriguing character. Playing as a faction means more than having your units be different colors. Each faction gives the player certain bonuses and penalties, such as Commissioner Pravin Lal's inefficient bureaucracy and Sister Miriam Godwinson's +25% bonus to attack due to the strength of her followers' convictions.

On day three of my residency, I fired up the game to allegedly help me overcome a bit of writer's block. I picked to play as the Nautilus Pirates (one of the expansion factions), set the difficulty to Talent, and watched the opening movie clip. The next time I looked up, the sun

SMAC Quotes

Man has killed man from the beginning of time, and each new frontier has brought new ways and new places to die. Why should the future be different?

Col. Corazon Santiago
"Planet: A Survivalist's Guide"

A brave little theory, and actually quite coherent for a system of five or seven dimensions--if only we lived in one.

Academician Prokhor Zakharov
"Now We Are Alone"

Some would ask, how could a perfect God create a universe filled with so much that is evil. They have missed a greater conundrum: Why would a perfect God create a universe at all?

Sister Miriam Godwinson
"But for the Grace of God"

Resources exist to be consumed. And consumed they will be, if not by this generation then by some future. By what

right does this forgotten future seek to deny us our birthright? None I say! Let us take what is ours, chew and eat our fill.

CEO Nwabudike Morgan
"The Ethics of Greed"

Why do you insist that the human genetic code is "sacred" or "taboo"? It is a chemical process and nothing more. For that matter we are chemical processes and nothing more. If you deny yourself a useful tool simply because it reminds you uncomfortably of your mortality, you have uselessly and pointlessly crippled yourself.

Chairman Sheng-ji Yang
"Looking God in the Eye"

As the writhing, teeming mass of Mind Worms swarmed over the outer perimeter, we saw the defenders recoil in horror. "Stay calm! Use your flame guns!" shouted the commander, but to no avail. It is well known that the Mind

Worm Boil uses psychic terror to paralyze its prey, and then carefully implants ravenous larvae in the brains of its still-conscious victims. Even with the best weapons, only the most disciplined troops can resist this horrific attack.

Lady Deirdre Skye
"Our Secret War"

As the Americans learned so painfully in Earth's final century, free flow of information is the only safeguard against tyranny. The once-chained people whose leaders at last lose their grip on information flow will soon burst with freedom and vitality, but the free nation gradually constricting its grip on public discourse has begun its rapid slide into despotism. Beware of he who would deny you access to information, for in his heart he dreams himself your master.

Commissioner Pravin Lal
"U.N. Declaration of Rights"

had risen and 14 hours of my life were gone. Alcoholics have it easy; this game is downright poison.

It's hard to pinpoint why this game hits the neurons in just the right way. The voice-acting is superb and pervasive. Every time you build a facility or complete a Secret Project, you hear a character saying something. The sheer amount of text written for this game is only dwarfed by how, for lack of a better word, **good** it is.

But ultimately, the genius of the game is how it flawlessly blends its great writing with strategy elements. No matter which faction you pick, you are beset on all sides by a pink "Xenofungus," which grows on Planet's surface. The fungus is an important strategic element, as it is difficult to cross and units enveloped within it are invisible to enemies. Xenofungus is not desirable to build bases near, as it cannot be worked to

produce minerals or nutrients. It can also spawn nasty critters called "Mind Worms," which attack your bases and units with devastating neural attacks. Mind Worms are somewhat analogous to the barbarian hordes in *Civ* games but in their familiarity lurks a surprise.

At first, the attacks seem random, but the player, told through text popups, begins to hear strange mutterings from a Voice. The Voice threatens more attacks if the pollution and corruption caused by humans goes unchecked. The Voice, fungus and Mind Worms play out as huge parts of the endgame - I won't reveal how - and the player considers their connections because it's a great story, and if you don't, you'll probably lose.

Alpha Centauri does everything right. Even PC Gamer recognized its greatness, giving the game a 98% score, tied only with *Half-Life* as the highest rated game in the magazine's history. *SMAC* won

many game of the year awards in 1999. And yet, it has sold the least copies out of all the games in the *Civilization* series, and receives the least attention. It is not on anyone's top 100 list, and there are not three sequels.

Firaxis designers know it is good. Features first introduced in *Alpha Centauri* have trickled down into the company's titles. Each civilization's characteristics in *Civ 3 is* reminiscent of faction bonus and penalties. The government system in *Civ 4* is nearly identical to *Alpha Centauri*, with five different sliders focusing on different aspects of government, like labor and economy.

Why hasn't Firaxis cashed in on what could be a great franchise? Is it because Brian Reynolds left Firaxis in 2000, forming Big Huge Games? Did he take the IP of *Alpha Centauri* with him or does Firaxis feel they can't make a sequel

without Reynolds being involved? Or am I just making all this up and it's the poor sales that have discouraged a sequel? Sadly, neither Sid Meier nor Brian Reynolds is talking.

Whatever the reason, I think they are missing something. The game is still addictive in 2005. Given an entire month to write a great drama, I spent my time instead building needlejets and arguing with Professor Zakharov on where to coordinate our attack plans to wipe out the Human Hive. Creating a future history in *Alpha Centauri* was more satisfying than writing my own.

Greg Tito is a playwright and standup comic residing in Brooklyn, NY. He is currently splitting time between World of Warcraft, a new D&D 3rd edition campaign and finishing one of his many uncompleted writing projects. He also blogs semi-regularly at http://onlyzuul.blogspot.com/

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MEET THE TEAM

Each week we ask a question of our staff and featured writers to learn a little bit about them and gain some insight into where they are coming from. This week's question is:

"We all missed out on coming up with the great idea of sliced bread. What would be your 'Why hasn't this been made yet' invention?"

Allen Varney, "The Buzz is Gone"
I already wrote back in *The Escapist* issue 5 about the "lifegame," a massively multiplayer online shared world keyed to a single megacorporation's stores and product lines. Advancing in the game, you'd earn real-world coupons and discounts; buying actual merchandise, you'd advance in the game. "If you complete this quest, you'll receive 100 experience and 10 percent off your next meal at Applebee's! Buy ten grande lattes at Starbuck's and your next character upgrade is free!" C'mon, you know it'll happen someday....

John Tynes, "The Contrarian"
A cheese grater in the form of a flat paddle with a handle, with two parallel strips of holes in two gauges (large & small). The teeth would protrude in opposite directions so you can rotate the grater and have the gauge you want on the right side of the paddle.

Kris Naudus, "Pigtails, Pioneers, and Polygons"
What? How dare you try to steal my brilliant "As Seen on TV" idea! Soon to be sold at a mall kiosk near you!

Greg Tito, "Alpha Centauri: The Final Frontier"
The Time-Slower. Built to let you savor those moments when you are doing something you actually enjoy. Conversely, I would also make and market the Time-Quickener to make waiting in line at the DMV take only three seconds. While we're at it, I would also invent the Fantasy Machine and make myself a pony.

Joe Blancato, "Someday, I'll Hack the Gibson", Contributing Editor
It's a "Jump to Conclusions Mat." You see, you have this mat, with different CONCLUSIONS written on it that you could JUMP TO. Thank you, Mike Judge, for your inspiring tale of the terrors of office life, not to mention a million dollar dream I'm going to someday realize!

JR Sutich, Contributing Editor
A machine that squirts water in Joe's "O" face every time he makes a lame Office Space reference. To ensure that everyone on the planet owns a dozen of them, I'll use Starbucks for distribution.

Julianne Greer, Executive Editor
Boxes of Sour Jacks Watermelon candies larger than 3.5 oz. Seeing as how I run on coffee and these chewy, fruity candies, a larger package of these would make my life easier. And, for that matter, if they could be sold in normal grocery stores, that'd be great, as the only place I've found them is my local Blockbuster and they're beginning to look at me strangely for my frequent visits for candy.